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Cleveland Conference on Illegitimacy

“The unwed mother and her child”

Cleveland, Ohio

1916

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"The Unwed Mother and Her Child"

REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OF THE

Cleveland Conference on Illegitimacy and Its Committees

PUBLISHED BY

Cleveland, Ohio

July, 1916

"THE UNWED MOTHER AND HER CHILD"

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What Cleveland's Birth Records Show

By the Committee on Birth Registration:

Miss Orre B. Haseltine—Educational Secretary of the Associated Charities, Chairman.

Miss Elizabeth Arnold—Trustee of the Retreat of the Young Women's Christian Association.

Mrs. F. C. Blyth—social worker at City Hospital.

Dr. Theodore Miller of Maternity Hospital.

Cleveland's birth-rate of illegitimate children as recorded is less than that of other Middle-Western cities. Out of 17,316 births registered last year, the Health Office has a count of 386 illegitimate births or 2.25 per cent. Other cities range from 2.4 per cent in Dayton to 4.6 per cent in Minneapolis. Although it is certain that Cleveland's illegitimate birth rate is actually higher than the mark indicated, because of greater likelihood of failure to register such births than those in wedlock, such errors of course occur in other cities, and it is to be presumed that conditions are better in Cleveland than in many other cities.

According to a detailed study of birth registration for the first six months of last year (1915) 121 out of 175 births registered took place in hospitals or special institutions. The registration by midwives was very low, only eighteen. The Committee is inclined to suspect that here lies one point of serious laxity in birth registration.

Only 43 out of the 121 institutional births took place in the rescue homes which undertake to know the girl's background, to keep her long enough to know well her personality and needs, and to keep some oversight of her after dismissal. From these homes came the fuller birth certificates, the detailed information concerning the man, and probably the more accurate information concerning the girl.

The hospitals, apparently, were less interested in securing the details about the man than the practicing physician or even the midwives. The Committee is naturally concerned in this matter, believing that an equal interest in the father of the child is essential if we are to know our prob-

lem of illegitimacy more thoroughly from the community standpoint and particularly if we are to secure a better chance for the unwed mother and her child by relieving her of at least a part of the burden of support of the child.

Only 117 of the 175 babies were registered with full name. Two certificates had no surname indicated. Fifty were left blank. The Health Department is now, however, attempting to secure supplemental reports in all cases of incompleteness.

Still births are astonishingly low in number, five out of the 175. Inasmuch as there is usually from three to five per cent of still births in the general registration of the year, this very low percentage among illegitimate births may mean that in case of still birth, the attending physician or midwife is easily induced to make no record of the event.

Only 110 of the 175 mothers were recorded as living in Cleveland. Those coming from other places numbered 61. Four were recorded as having no home. The institutions and hospitals took almost exclusive care of the out-of-town girls. The Committee must emphasize the necessity of enforcing upon other cities and the country districts the care of their own illegitimacy.

The medium age of the 175 registrations lies between 17 and 22, with 110 mothers. Eighteen of the mothers were recorded as having had other children; eight with one other child, seven of the eight unmarried; six with two other children, three of the six unmarried; two with three other children, both of them married; one with six other children and one with nine, both married. The occupation of these unmarried girls with previous illegitimate children was housework in ten cases and factory work in two.

The Committee is astonished at the number of unwed mothers apparently engaged in housework, 100 of the 175 being thus listed. The next largest number was 17 at factory or shop work; the same number in office or stores; and fifteen at school. The remainder were listed as dress-maker, waitress, telephone operator, day-work, teacher, milliner and musician. The figures would seem to indicate that the amount of illegitimacy decreases as you go up the scale of mental training or capacity as indicated by occupation.

The Committee must affirm its impression as to the monotonous routine of housework, the limited amount of leisure, the limitation of social contacts, as possibly being conducive to a desire for unusual gayety and

diversion when the leisure time is at hand, and the further fact that the girl at domestic service has no way of concealing the fact of her pregnancy, and being cared for in a hospital or maternity home, is more certain of registration.

One of the chief difficulties in the social life of the domestic is the absence of a place in which to receive (gentlemen) callers. A near-by settlement may solve this problem. When the settlement is lacking and the employer unable to provide a suitable room in her own home a co-operative providing of such a place in a neighborhood might be worked out. The ultimate solution may be found in making housework an 8-hour a day occupation like factory and store work, the worker having her home outside of the place of employment.

In accounting for the large number of unwed mothers among housework girls the following probabilities are pointed out:

(A) That the out-of-town girl finds housework the easiest way to get quickly established in the city. She may be equipped and may later go into another type of work, but the adjustment period is the crucial time for her socially as well as industrially.

(B) Girls engaged in other types of work may, when finding themselves in trouble, leave the other work and go to the more sheltered occupation of housework and at the birth of child be registered as domestic although only temporarily so employed.

(C) The girl of low mental grade is most frequently found at housework because only there does she secure enough direction in her work to make it possible for her to hold her own. The lack of competition is also in her favor.

The Committee was impressed with the fact that such an inconsiderable number of these girls receive care at this crucial time from organizations which assume the full measure of responsibility. How many receiving care at hospitals which take in and dismiss without question, have the help they need from wise friends or other kinds of social agencies, we cannot know.

But certainly the community cannot know its problem in community size terms, and uniformly helpful service be given the individual girl toward the satisfactory adjustment of her own problem until a central agency, preferably municipal or state, assume an oversight of the individual cases, being as concerned with the past which produced the individual situation

and with adjustment of it as are the special agencies for the care of unwed mothers.

With centralization of responsibility in a public bureau, the public records would be brought to the point of meeting its needs.

ILLEGITIMATE BIRTHS IN CITIES OF THE MIDDLE WEST

CITY	Total Births	Illegitimate	Per cent.
St. Paul (1915)	5,290	198	3.7
Pittsburgh (1914)	16,330	521	3.2
Minneapolis (1914)	7,889	360	4.6
Grand Rapids (1914)	3,205	93	2.9
(1915)	3,281	117	3.6
Dayton (1914)	2,950	70	2.4
(1915)	2,697	82	3.
Cincinnati (1914)	8,080	281	3.4
St. Louis (1913) (white)	13,654	576	4.2
Milwaukee (1914)	11,929	324	2.7
Cleveland (1915)	17,316	386	2.26

The Courts and Illegitimacy

By the Committee on Legal Status:

Judge George P. Baer—Municipal Court, chairman.
Judge George S. Addams of Juvenile Court.
Cheney C. Jones—General Agent of the Cleveland Humane Society.
Mrs. Ella M. Jewell—Matron of the Florence Crittenten Home.
E. J. Henry—Superintendent of the Cleveland Protestant Orphan Asylum.

Because of these facts:—

1. That Municipal Court only examines cases of bastardy and then must bind them over to Common Pleas Court;

2. That no public official is charged with the responsibility of prosecuting cases of bastardy on behalf of the girl;

3. That no one has the responsibility of keeping in touch with these girls and seeing that they get the attention they need:—

It often happens that cases of bastardy bound over to Common Pleas Court from Municipal Court fail of prosecution, through non-appearance of the complaining witness.

Furthermore, the settlements when made are usually for a lump sum of $300, of which the lawyer generally gets half. In consequence the girl's share is inconsiderable in comparison with the cost of maintaining her child until he is self-supporting (sixteen years or more). In addition, the girl, irresponsible, quite often spends her settlement unwisely and quickly is left penniless.

It would seem wise to this committee, therefore, that the whole consideration of bastardy cases be confined to one court; that some public officer be responsible for prosecution, both so that the case may not be dropped and so that the girl may get the full settlement; that settlement be in weekly or monthly payments over a period of years instead of a lump sum, and a bond given to secure payment; and that a probation officer, preferably a woman, be appointed to be the girl's guardian when necessary, to administer the settlement for the welfare of the mother and child and help guide the girl in the future.

The Menace of the Feeble-Minded

By the Committee on Feeblemindedness:

Miss Helen R. Smith—Psychologist of the Juvenile Court, chairman.

Mrs. H. H. Cully—President of the Florence Crittenten Circle.

Miss Lucy Barkwill—Trustee of the Retreat of the Young Women's Christian Association.

Dr. J. E. Tuckerman—Secretary of the Cleveland Academy of Medicine.

Dr. C. E. Gehlke—Associate Professor of Sociology in Adelbert College of Western Reserve University.

Feeblemindedness is unquestionably a large factor in illegitimacy.

Rescue homes for unwed mothers generally show a larger proportion of feeblemindedness than the population at large. Out of ten girls at one Cleveland institution, the supposedly lower half were tested with a result of two normal, two "borderline" and one "moron" (mental age nine to twelve years). Ten girls from another home showed four feebleminded, four normal and two questionable.

In one Associated Charities district, out of 43 mothers of illegitimate children reported, twelve are known to be feebleminded and 22 are suspected. In other words, 21 per cent are normal, 28 per cent are sub-normal and 51 per cent are suspected.

One day nursery reported out of twelve illegitimate mothers, four sub-normal, or 33 per cent, sub-normal and two, or sixteen per cent, suspected.

Two other day nurseries made the following statement:

The illegitimate children they cared for were, as a class, inferior to other children physically and in home care. Out of thirteen illegitimate children, three were sub-normal. Five mothers were sub-normal.

It is to be noted that these figures of sub-normal to normal cannot be taken as standing absolutely for the illegitimacy problem as a whole, because, through the mere fact that the unwed mothers considered are in

a greater or less degree dependents, they are, in a sense, a selected lower class.

In the public schools, too, a definite relationship is observed between feeblemindedness and immorality, if not illegitimacy. Out of a special class of feebleminded girls, with mental ages from seven to eleven, with forty members during the year, eight came to the class with recognized tendencies to immorality. Cases of illegitimacy are known to exist in seven of the families.

The average age at which the girls leave the class is sixteen years. Their history is then likely to be one of short-lived jobs. The lines open to them, as shown by records of the previous year, are domestic service, sweat-shop work, and the simpler operations in cigar or clothing factory.

In the histories of those whose home protection was not considered adequate, the following factors appeared: "father, gambler"; "father, deserted, mother spends time working or dependent on Charities"; "brothers at Reform School, sister at Deaf School"; "mother weak"; etc.

From observation especially of the Rescue Homes, where girls having their second or third child may be received, the need becomes apparent for more use and greater centralization of the information recorded by organizations caring for the unwed mother. Cases of repetition could be immediately noted and, when appropriate, assigned more quickly to institutional care.

From the modern point of view, it is not only advantageous, but highly necessary, for the sake of the child, that full record be kept of his heredity. The child of feebleminded parents presents a protracted and very special problem, since his deficiency may not appear until he is ten or twelve years old. Even if the hereditary taint does not appear in him, it is his supposedly to transmit to his offspring.

We cannot yet approach the problem of dealing adequately with the moron. We can, however, recognize him and by proper records the more intelligently select the ones that can be dealt with.

With such reports as could be drawn from the records of the charities and the rescue homes, it seems there might be at least a greater concentration upon the subject of the moron girl of child-bearing age.

To decrease the possibilities of illegitimate offspring from moron girls, it is highly advisable that some watch be kept over these girls during the summer vacation. Experience shows that the greater number of

misdemeanors on the part of these girls occur outside the school year. The department in charge of these girls feels this so strongly that the question of summer classes for the morons has frequently been discussed, from the point of view of protection to the members themselves and to the neighborhood. Such classes are, however, financially impossible.

Interviews with special teachers always bring out the fact that a certain number of their girls have a definite history of immorality or immoral tendencies; that certain ones of them, because of home conditions known to the teacher, are especially in need of protection themselves, or are especially dangerous to others.

For these reasons the department of the Board of Education and the Humane Society make the following suggestions, which they believe might be acted upon with good results, pending some kind of adequate supervision of the moron girl of child-bearing age.

1. It is recommended that girls in special classes or listed for special classes, throughout the city schools, who are in their sixteenth year, shall, in June, be reported to a committee formed for the purpose of apportioning them to appropriate organizations for surveillance during the summer.

This statement should include such brief history of the girl or statement of home conditions, from the records of the special teacher and the nurse, as would give the acting organization immediate contact with the case.

These organizations should report back, if possible, to the School system in the fall.

2. It is the hope of the Medical Department that one nurse may eventually be detailed for the special duty of taking charge of the Special Class children, instead of their being distributed among all the nurses as they are at present. It is believed that continuous relations with these children, especially after these relations had continued over several years, together with the cumulative experience such relationships would bring, would greatly increase the value of the services of this nurse in her own department and in her co-operation with other interested agencies.

3. It is desirable that a census be taken or that the results of the partial census made by the Board of Education be used to estimate the number of feebleminded girls in the city, now needing care; that institutions interested contribute all possible information concerning the girl or

her family; and that the attention of the public be directed to the economic and social results of their careers; and to feasible plans for the permanent supervision of part of this number in their homes and for the establishment of a partially self-supporting training home for others.

The Unwed Mother As Deserted Wife

By the Committee on Mother Care:

Mrs. R. R. Christian—Recording Secretary of the Florence Crittenten Home, Chairman.

Miss Helen Bever—Social Service Nurse of the Babies' Dispensary and Hospital.

Miss Rachel Gallagher—Chief of the Girls' and Women's Bureau of the State-City Labor Exchange.

Miss Alice Hunt—Agent of the Department of Child Protection of the Cleveland Humane Society.

Dr. Nina Stansbury—Trustee of the Woman's Hospital.

Mrs. George H. Crafts—former Superintendent, Methodist Deaconess Home.

Miss Ora Sturtevant—Family Visitor of the Cleveland Day Nursery and Free Kindergarten Association.

Mrs. Elizabeth Clarke—Matron of the Retreat of the Y. W. C. A.

Major Clara van der Schouw—Matron of the Salvation Army Rescue Home.

Miss Ola Weaver—Social Worker of the Episcopal City Mission.

Eleven years ago, Bertha was made to give up her illegitimate baby. This was insisted upon by her parents who had what they thought was her interest at heart. They were quite sure they were doing the very best thing for their daughter. A year or so later Bertha married the father of her baby. In a couple of years, another baby came to them, but only to live a short time. Last year, Bertha wrote a letter to the Humane Society to learn what had become of her first baby, and to ask if she might have him for her own. Never since he was torn from her arms, had she been able to go to bed at night without thinking of him. The baby cannot be found.

It is quite probable that Bertha will become a nervous wreck, if the aching void that she has carried all these years is not filled.

* * *

Sarah left her home when she was eighteen because of the unhappiness to which she had been subjected. Her father's intemperance and abuse made her feel that the city would give her a happier life. She easily found a place at house work. Two years later, she became a mother. The father of her child disappeared after paying her hospital bill.

When the baby was three months old, Sarah was out of work. A home was found where she could go with her baby, and here she proved most trustworthy. She later decided to place her baby at board, as he was getting older and she thought she would be able to earn more money without him.

The baby had been in the boarding home but a few weeks when the boarding mother thought it would be a fine thing for herself and husband to have this promising baby for their own. Sarah listened to their proposal and shortly before the baby was two years old, she gave him legally to the foster parents. Now Sarah is nearly heart-broken because she has given up her child. She asks that other unwed mothers be urged to keep their babies in order that they may not make her terrible mistake.

* * *

Nellie was so shy and timid that it was very difficult to get her story when admitted to a Cleveland rescue-home, and was so frail that it seemed it would be an up-hill road for her to make a living for herself. She was so nervous that she could not set a table without breaking a dish and then would have a good cry over the accident.

When a sweet little baby girl arrived it seemed an impossible and unreasonable thing, from a physical standpoint, to suppose that this young, frail girl could support herself and baby. It was therefore suggested that it might be best to find a good home for the baby.

Now Nellie's mother love came to the front and she declared that she would work the nails off her fingers, rather than have her child go through life, longing as she had done, to know who her mother and father were. She said she would gladly give all she ever hoped to possess to know that one thing.

It was surprising to see how well she managed to get on with her baby. First of all she was at general housework. When last heard of, the little girl was seven years old and a fine healthy child going to school. Nellie had gone to a small city, rented a small cottage and had a garden of her own. She kept a young girl to look after the little girl while she went out to work to support the home.

Nellie as a child had been adopted by a very good family. She was well cared for and loved but never ceased to long to know who her mother was and whether she was born in wedlock.

* * *

Jennie, a proud, high-spirited girl, was determined that when her baby was born it should be adopted; but when a fine baby boy arrived upon the scene, mother's love changed the plan and she made up her mind to face the world with her "disgrace." It did hurt her pride and the struggle was often a hard one but never once did she think of giving up her boy.

When the child was about four years old she married and her husband took the boy into his heart and home. The boy is now about nine years old and has two brothers. The three boys fare alike and now make a very happy family group and Jennie has no cause for regret so far as keeping her baby is concerned.

* * *

A Slavish girl, twenty-one years old, came with her three-week-old baby to the Babies' Dispensary. She said she would not take it away, and if she had not been frightened would have deserted it on the steps of the dispensary.

She was taken to court, and the father of the baby, who was a married man, was made to pay three hundred dollars. The mother used a little of this. Then she was given a position as wet nurse and later as housemaid, with her child.

The baby is now eighteen months old, and the mother is very proud of her. The mother is to be married next week, and the young man has promised to support mother and child. The mother still has one hundred and fifty dollars of money received from the baby's father, which will be turned over to the baby in a few days.

The success, in this case, was due to the close supervision of the Babies' Dispensary nurse.

* * *

A sound plan of help for the unmarried mother and her child must seek to bring both into as normal a relationship as possible with society and must use every means available to maintain them in this relationship. For the purposes of constructive treatment, they should be regarded as an incomplete family group containing the nucleus of a home. In this

respect, they resemble the widow and child and the deserted wife and child.

It is preferable to consider them in the deserted wife group. The situations are practically identical except for the formality of marriage. This classification makes provision for the possible completion of the family group through the reunion of the parents.

Tested by the principles enumerated above, most of our present day methods of treatment are unsound. Instead of bringing the mother and her child into a normal relation to society, we put both into a special class branded with a stigma that makes difficult and often impossible their social adjustment. To force upon her the unnatural and often demoralizing act of giving up her child, to treat the child as an orphan when in most instances both parents are living and to send the mother out into the world childless and often homeless, is destructive at every point.

Eliminating from our discussion the feeble-minded and the incorrigible, two groups whose care and proper treatment the state should undertake in special institutions, we can lay down the following plan of treatment for what may be termed the normal unmarried mother and her child:—

As soon as the woman's condition is known, the social agency, such as the Associated Charities, whose function it is to protect and build up the home, should be called upon to take charge of the situation. Every effort should be made at once to establish the father's responsibility, to enforce it and, if possible, and advisable, to legalize the family situation through the marriage of the parents. The laws which apply to the deserting husband should be made to cover the case of the deserting unmarried father also and should be made more severe in both cases and more rigidly enforced.

The woman should receive the necessary pre-natal care and instruction and any financial assistance necessary should be rendered in the same manner and under the same conditions as in the case of the deserted wife.

For the birth of her child, the mother should receive the same home or hospital care as we recognize to be the right of any married woman.

After the birth of her child, the mother and child should be established together in a suitable manner and the treatment applicable to the deserted wife continue to be employed. Every social force available should be called into play to build up and maintain the home. The mother

should be eligible to receive a mother's pension under the same conditions as any mother of dependent children.

Employment suited to the mother's health and ability and not prejudicial to the child's well-being should be secured. In this city, the task of helping these women find employment should be centralized in the State-City Employment Bureau.

Financial assistance should be given as needed to supplement the mother's earnings. Special help along the line of industrial training and vocational guidance is particularly necessary with this group of women, usually quite young and lacking in wage-earning experience.

Diligent effort should be made to create friendly relationships to round out the circle of this woman's life. To this end, the worker in charge of the case should enlist the services of all who might assist effectively,—the friendly visitor, the Big Sister, the girl's employer in some instances, the church, relatives, neighbors, friends and, above all, the immediate family of both parents of the child. In none of these relationships should the woman be made to feel in any way that she is a social outcast or essentially different from other mothers.

The method of treatment outlined above simplifies considerably the problem of the unwed mother and her child. The difficulties which have heretofore seemed so peculiarly baffling in their case, such as inefficiency, irresponsibility, unemployment and underpayment, become the same as in the case of the widow or the deserted wife and can be dealt with in the same manner.

Public opinion must, however, be brought to regard the unmarried mother in a more sympathetic light. Social workers must themselves adopt the correct attitude toward her and see the whole question in its larger scope. They come in contact with only a limited section of the problem of illegitimacy, namely that which comes to light through dependency. A complete study of the problem should include those unmarried parents who have sufficient means to evade the responsibility of rearing their illegitimate offspring.

It is a serious question whether the state does not owe it to these children to enforce without distinction of class the obligations of parenthood of both the father and the mother.

Care and Prevention

Final Report Adopted by the Cleveland Conference on Illegitimacy
June 22, 1916

We acknowledge these evils as existing in Cleveland at the present day:

1. At least one baby out of every fifty born in Cleveland is illegitimate.

Leading causes of illegitimacy are feeble-mindedness of the mother, which lessens her ability to resist temptation; and moral dangers of certain occupations, such as housework.

2. An unusually high death-rate is observed among these babies, for present conditions too often allow the mother to dispose of the child before the full period of nursing is over.

3. In a large number of cases, no settlement is made by the father, and the mother either must bear alone the burden of supporting her child or give it away.

4. Even where settlement is made, it is generally for a relatively small lump sum which must be still further reduced by division with a lawyer.

5. Many cases, bound over to the Court of Common Pleas by Municipal Court, are lost through failure of the prosecuting witness to appear.

We declare our faith in these principles:—

1. The unwed father and mother and their child must be considered as constituting a single problem. The father and mother must share responsibility for the child's support until it is old enough to support itself. The child must be removed from its mother's care only when any other course is humanly impossible, and certainly not in any event until the child has had at least six months nursing care from its mother.

2. Steps must be taken to reduce the present amount of illegitimacy, through reduction or elimination of its causes.

To these ends, we make the following recommendations:

1. That all cases of illegitimacy (bastardy) be handled by one court.

2. That some public official assume responsibility of prosecuting all cases requesting his attention.

3. That settlement by the father be in weekly or monthly payments, continuable until the child is of self-supporting age, and secured by a bond given to the court.

4. That the court maintain a woman probation officer, whose duties shall be to co-operate with all existing agencies for the care of the unwed mother and her child, to get in touch with all cases of illegitimacy as indicated by the birth records and see that the best possible is done for the mother and child; to advise and work with the mother in any court action which may arise; to act as guardian for the administration of funds granted in settlement, when necessary; and act as the girl's adviser so long as guidance may be necessary.

5. That the Division of Health be commended for its activities in securing better birth registration, and that every possible measure be taken to secure full and accurate registration particularly of illegitimate births.

6. That social agencies give the unwed mother with a child the same treatment as is required by a deserted mother with child and that steps be taken for the provision of mothers' pensions for such women.

7. That the Girls' and Women's Bureau of the State-City Labor Exchange make a particular effort to find work suitable for unwed mothers with their children and take whatever steps may be possible toward the standardization and improvement of conditions in housework.

8. That the Board of Education provide the Department dealing with feeble-minded children funds for supervision of feeble-minded girls during the summer vacation and after they leave school.

9. That all social agencies co-operate to the fullest possible degree with the central registry of feeble-minded recently established in the office of the Associated Charities.

MEMBERSHIP

The Cleveland Conference on Illegitimacy

1915-1916

George S. Addams, Judge, Juvenile Court
Miss Elizabeth Arnold, Trustee, Retreat of the Y. W. C. A.
Miss Gertrude Barnes, Social Service Nurse, Lakeside Hospital
Miss Lucy Barkwill, Trustee, Retreat of the Y. W. C. A.
George P. Baer, Judge, Municipal Court
Miss Helen Bever, Social Service Nurse, Babies' Dispensary and Hospital
Miss Gertrude Bialosky, Teacher, Class for the Feeble Minded
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Dr. J. E. Tuckerman, Secretary, Cleveland Academy of Medicine
Major Clara Van der Schouw, Matron, Salvation Army Rescue Home
Miss Ola Weaver, Social Worker, Episcopal City Mission
Dr. C. W. Wyckoff, Chief, Bureau of Child Hygiene, Division of Health, City of Cleveland
Elwood Street, Assistant Secretary, the Cleveland Federation for Charity and Philanthropy, chairman and secretary of the Conference on Illegitimacy

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